

THE GRANDMOTHER'S APOLOGY.

BY ALFRED TENNYSON.



I.

AND Willy, my eldest born, is gone, you say, little Anne?
 Ruddy and white, and strong on his legs, he looks like a man.
 And Willy's wife has written: she never was overwise,
 Never the wife for Willy: he wouldn't take my advice.

II.

For, Annie, you see, her father was not the man to save,
 Hadn't a head to manage, and drank himself into his grave.
 Pretty enough, very pretty! but I was against it for one.
 Eh!—but he wouldn't hear me—and Willy, you say, is gone.

III.

Willy, my beauty, my eldest boy, the flower of the flock,
 Never a man could fling him: for Willy stood like a rock.
 "Here's a leg for a babe of a week!" says doctor; and he would be bound,
 There was not his like that year in twenty parishes round.

IV.

Strong of his hands, and strong on his legs, but still of his tongue!
 I ought to have gone before him: I wonder he went so young.
 I cannot cry for him, Annie: I have not long to stay;
 Perhaps I shall see him the sooner, for he lived far away.

V.

Why do you look at me, Annie? you think I am hard and cold;
 But all my children have gone before me, I am so old:
 I cannot weep for Willy, nor can I weep for the rest;
 Only at your age, Annie, I could have wept with the best.

VI.

For I remember a quarrel I had with your father, my dear,
All for a slanderous story, that cost me many a tear.
I mean your grandfather, Annie : it cost me a world of woe,
Seventy years ago, my darling, seventy years ago.

VII.

For Jenny, my cousin, had come to the place, and I knew right well
That Jenny had tript in her time : I knew, but I would not tell.
And she to be coming and slandering me, the base little liar !
But the tongue is a fire as you know, my dear, the tongue is a fire.

VIII.

And the parson made it his text that week, and he said likewise,
That a lie which is half a truth is ever the blackest of lies,
That a lie which is all a lie may be met and fought with outright,
But a lie which is part a truth is a harder matter to fight.

IX.

And Willy had not been down to the farm for a week and a day ;
And all things look'd half-dead, tho' it was the middle of May.
Jenny, to slander me, who knew what Jenny had been !
But soiling another, Annie, will never make oneself clean.

X.

And I cried myself well-nigh blind, and all of an evening late
I climb'd to the top of the garth, and stood by the road at the gate.
The moon like a rick on fire was rising over the dale,
And whit, whit, whit, in the bush beside me chirrup the nightingale.

XI.

All of a sudden he stopt : there past by the gate of the farm,
Willy,—he didn't see me,—and Jenny hung on his arm.
Out into the road I started, and spoke I scarce knew how ;
Ah, there's no fool like the old one—it makes me angry now.

XII.

Willy stood up like a man, and look'd the thing that he meant ;
Jenny, the viper, made me a mocking courtesy and went.
And I said, "Let us part : in a hundred years it'll all be the same,
You cannot love me at all, if you love not my good name."

XIII.

And he turn'd, and I saw his eyes all wet, in the sweet moonshine :
"Sweetheart, I love you so well that your good name is mine.
And what do I care for Jane, let her speak of you well or ill ;
But marry me out of hand : we two shall be happy still."

XIV.

"Marry you, Willy !" said I, "but I needs must speak my mind,
I fear you will listen to tales, be jealous and hard and unkind."
But he turn'd and claspt me in his arms, and answer'd, "No, love, no ;"
Seventy years ago, my darling, seventy years ago.

XV.

So Willy and I were wedded : I wore a lilac gown ;
And the ringers rang with a will, and he gave the ringers a crown.
But the first that ever I bare was dead before he was born,
Shadow and shine is life, little Annie, flower and thorn.

XVI.

That was the first time, too, that ever I thought of death.
There lay the sweet little body that never had drawn a breath.
I had not wept, little Anne, not since I had been a wife ;
But I wept like a child that day, for the babe had fought for his life.

XVII.

His dear little face was troubled, as if with anger or pain :
I look'd at the still little body—his trouble had all been in vain.
For Willy I cannot weep, I shall see him another morn :
But I wept like a child for the child that was dead before he was born.

XVIII.

But he cheer'd me, my good man, for he seldom said me nay :
Kind, like a man, was he ; like a man, too, would have his way :
Never jealous—not he : we had many a happy year ;
And he died, and I could not weep—my own time seem'd so near.

XIX.

But I wish'd it had been God's will that I, too, then could have died :
I began to be tired a little, and fain had slept at his side.
And that was ten years back, or more, if I don't forget :
But as to the children, Annie, they're all about me yet.

XX.

Pattering over the boards, my Annie who left me at two,
Patter she goes, my own little Annie, an Annie like you :
Pattering over the boards, she comes and goes at her will,
While Harry is in the five-acre and Charlie ploughing the hill.

XXI.

And Harry and Charlie, I hear them too—they sing to their team :
Often they come to the door in a pleasant kind of a dream.
They come and sit by my chair, they hover about my bed—
I am not always certain if they be alive or dead.

XXII.

And yet I know for a truth, there's none of them left alive ;
For Harry went at sixty, your father at sixty-five :
And Willy, my eldest born, at nigh threescore and ten ;
I knew them all as babies, and now they're elderly men.

XXIII.

For mine is a time of peace, it is not often I grieve ;
I am oftener sitting at home in my father's farm at eve :
And the neighbours come and laugh and gossip, and so do I ;
I find myself often laughing at things that have long gone by.

XXIV.

To be sure the preacher says, our sins should make us sad :
But mine is a time of peace, and there is Grace to be had ;
And God, not man, is the Judge of us all when life shall cease ;
And in this Book, little Annie, the message is one of Peace.

XXV.

And age is a time of peace, so it be free from pain,
And happy has been my life ; but I would not live it again.
I seem to be tired a little, that's all, and long for rest ;
Only at your age, Annie, I could have wept with the best.

XXVI.

So Willy has gone, my beauty, my eldest-born, my flower ;
But how can I weep for Willy, he has but gone for an hour,—
Gone for a minute, my son, from this room into the next ;
I, too, shall go in a minute. What time have I to be vex't ?

XXVII.

And Willy's wife has written, she never was overwise.
Get me my glasses, Annie : thank God that I keep my eyes.
There is but a trifle left you, when I shall have past away.
But stay with the old woman now : you cannot have long to stay.